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VIOLIN TEACHING IN ITS RELATION TO THE ORGANIZATION OF CIVIC ORCHESTRAS

By E. W. MORPHY

AMONG the many factors of civic music not one gives so much trouble as the orchestra, and no component is so hard to control or so difficult to bring to a reasonable state of proficiency. Choral societies spring up almost over night; bands grow like mushrooms—quickly and in the most unexpected places; but the amateur orchestra is a frail flower, almost too delicate to keep alive, though too beautiful to let die. It is true we have more orchestras now than were extant a decade ago; nevertheless, these organizations are still in the minority and their individual growth is painfully slow. This condition is due to the scarcity of string-instrument players, especially violinists—good amateur violinists. The cities seem able to supply plenty of material for the professional orchestras, but while it is highly desirable to have these excellent symphonic organizations, those interested in civic improvement in general and who are anxious for our musical future want many non-professional orchestras to provide activity for players not sufficiently gifted to reach professional standards, and also to help rear a goodly number of appreciative listeners.

The scarcity of violinists is due, in part, to the following conditions: Until recently, the violin has not been a popular instrument in this country; especially as compared with some of the European countries, which have favored the violin and other orchestral instruments rather than the piano. The long period of apprenticeship which is required in order to gain even a little skill makes the violin unpopular with us. We prefer that form of violin practice which consists of sitting in a rocking chair and listening to Kreisler from a Victrola; like our physical exercise, as someone has cleverly said, which is nothing more strenuous than watching a picture of Charlie Chaplin kick someone in the shins. When we are willing to do more work with our brains and hands and not try to produce art works with machinery we shall be on the gain. We are too lazy for art requirements.

The easy, graceful movements of the advanced violinist have often baited the untalented weakling into the field. Only when such a one discovers that this freedom is the result of the most exacting industry, plus a natural aptitude akin to genius, and that perhaps years must be spent before he can even shape himself to the instrument, much less use it for artistic expression, does he appreciate the task he has set for himself. These unsuccessful ones unintentionally harm the cause by rehearsing their failures to others, thereby discouraging those who have talent but are just waiting for someone to draw it out.

Again, the violin is unpopular in certain localities because for many years it has kept bad company. In the country districts and small towns, even at the present time, it is used almost exclusively for the making of a low order of dance music. The example of a drunken fiddler at a country dance has kept many a parent from letting a talented child possess a violin. Since many of these parents had little or no opportunity to hear the violin used as a medium of artistic expression, it is little wonder that they could not conceive of its immense possibilities for pleasure and educational growth. As soon as young ladies had the courage to study the violin and the instrument worked its way into churches and educational institutions, its blue blood was recognized. The violin at its best is an aristocrat, as is proved by its polished manners in the string quartet, compelling the other string instruments to soften their voices and become genteel.

To many people the violin is not interesting because it is so largely a melodic instrument. Even those who have mastered it in some degree realize that they are musically handicapped because of its rather limited power to produce harmonies intact. Having to break harmonies into arpeggios leads the violinist into the bad habit of ignoring everything but melody, and this tune playing is likely to run to nothing but finger wiggling. The violin player who fails to secure a broad musical education runs great danger of forever remaining a fiddler. That the violinist must always seek the assistance of some form of accompaniment is a nuisance. This alone has caused many to abandon the instrument. When more than one personality is needed to express the work of a composer the number of rehearsals increases and much labor is required to produce a satisfactory ensemble. It may be argued that the vocalist suffers from the same conditions; but ask any experienced piano accompanist which of the two forms of ensemble is the harder to acquire and note the answer you will get without the slightest hesitation.

It is a fine thing for the cause of civic orchestras that "hope springs eternal in the human breast," for without this asset and the fact that the young student sees around him many who have been successful in mastering violin difficulties, he would not have the courage to slave for skill. Regardless of age, material, physical, mental or temperamental handicaps, every owner of a violin outfit intends to become an Ysaye or a Kreisler. It is the teacher's duty to assist these students to find themselves. Among the incurables is the man who starts late and expects to become a professional. It is only after he has squandered many years of his life foolishly torturing himself that he at last sinks in a sea of irritating difficulties. Next to the late beginner is the student who is innately careless. The slovenly person with loose mental habits is doomed to failure in any field of activity, but especially in music. He has, of course, as much right to study music as his more gifted brother, but he will learn some day that the world will not accept his efforts as art; in time, it may dawn on him that he can serve his community by not trying to squeeze his square musical talent into a round hole. Listeners are needed as well as performers, but the sluggard cannot get into either class, for it requires much industry and education to be a good listener these days.

Teachers can help the situation by urging students to weigh their talents before deciding to enter the profession, and to arouse the drone to get control of his life forces and apply them to his study of music or leave the field for those who are willing to keep awake on the job. How any violin student can watch our great soloists and professional orchestra players demonstrating the most intense mental concentration, return to his own slipshod methods of practice and still expect to make good, is beyond comprehension. The teacher or orchestra leader who struggles with a laggard can rest assured that in the great scheme of education his work will be appreciated; but he ought to be congratulated when such a one makes way for the player who is naturally equipped for the work, who has had good instruction at an early age, has grown to his instrument and handles its idioms with ease.

The dearth of violinists can, to some extent, be traced to wrong educational procedure in the home. Parents often choose the violin for the younger of two children, while the older one studies the piano. The plan is to provide for ensemble in the home as the children advance in age. This rarely proves satisfactory. More often it results in the loss of a possible violinist, for the younger child, starting later than the older one and on a

more difficult instrument, seldom catches up with the latter. The pianist finding it rather a bore to play the accompaniments of the simple violin pieces, the two drift apart. The rapid progress of the older child, who from the first has been able to make a more pleasing sound, discourages the young violinist and he drops from the race. Sometimes in later life he tries to resume the work, but the aridity of the elementary processes is too much for his strength of will, and the difficulties too numerous for the amount of time which he can afford to devote to the work.

There are pianists who will resent what has just been stated, but they are reminded that we are speaking of the early stages of the work. It is well known that if one becomes an artist on any instrument much labor and self-sacrifice is demanded, but in the elementary work there is no denying the fact that the violin can not only physically torture the player to a degree not known to pianists or other instrumentalists, but also audibly torture those who come within reasonable hearing distance. This probably accounts for the pictures we see of His Satanic Majesty who poses with either a fiddle or a pitchfork. We can find plenty of people who will testify to the difficulty of handling a violin. Dr. Samuel Johnson must have met with the experience, for he says, "In all things we can do something at first. Any man will forge a bar of iron, if you give him a hammer—not so well as a smith, but tolerably—and make a box, though a clumsy one; but give him a fiddle and a fiddle-stick, and he can do nothing." Haweis in his "Music and Morals" shows that he, too, discovered violin playing to be a man's job. "Do not," he says, "take up the violin unless you mean to work hard at it. Any other instrument may be more safely trifled with." Here is where we fail; we are afraid to work hard at it. We want something which will yield quick returns; hence the popularity of the ukulele.

The great number of pianists compared with the number of violinists can be traced somewhat to the piano dealers. Piano teachers owe much to the piano salesmen, for no sooner are pianos installed than teachers are secured to make players. If clever salesmen would only get into the towns with two or three carloads of violins—real violins, not instruments of torture—business would boom for the violin teachers. Nothing is so disastrous to progress or so sure to discourage a student as a vulgar-toned instrument. Theodore Thomas, speaking of the lack of artistic expression among adult players, said: "I am convinced that the prime reason for this defect amongst violinists is the lack of a good instrument in early life, which might have

awakened a sense of tone quality instead of noise." With so many excellent American makers, to say nothing of our reliable importers, good violins can be secured easily. It is the teacher's duty to educate the parents to the importance as well as the value of a fine-toned instrument. An occasional lecture or studio talk on the construction of the violin, bringing out the fact that a good violin grows more valuable with age, while other instruments only wear with age, will assist greatly to interest parents in better violins. *The Violinist* of June, 1914, contains an article entitled, "Judging a Violin," which has helped many students and their parents to form an opinion of that rather elusive thing called violin-tone, and taught them how to select a work of art instead of a piece of jackknife carpentry.

Regardless of this slow progress up Parnassus, affairs are moving in the right direction. In the future we are going to see plenty of fine material for our civic orchestras, for the system of class instruction which has had such a phenomenal growth in our public schools is already discovering much talent. Outfits are secured for the children and instruction furnished in classes for a few cents a lesson. At first the private teachers frowned upon the movement. Naturally, it is not easy for a teacher who was brought up on two private lessons a week, each an hour in length, to see how a person, especially a child, can learn violin playing in a class of ten or twenty; nor will he see how a teacher can compel himself in the late afternoon to listen to twenty tired children play in unison on factory-made fiddles. Fortunately, however, we have some teachers whose training and temperament make them peculiarly successful in this kind of work. These teachers work on the principle that "many are called but few are chosen." They make only this claim for their work: the best that can be expected is an early search for children who show talent, these to be handed on to the private teachers. This early weeding-out process will spare the untalented children much time and their parents considerable money. To quote one who sees the thing clearly, "The private teacher will get many pupils who start in classes, but who find it will be necessary for them to have private instruction in order to succeed, or who wish to arrive at a more finished style of playing than is possible with class instruction."

There are many things about the class system in the schools which will need to be watched carefully or much talent will be lost at the outset. Violin students must not be experimented on by inexperienced teachers. It is becoming the practice of

music supervisors to take a short course in violin playing to meet the demands of this new duty, and in so doing they keep the school boards from engaging teachers of experience. The music supervisor's life "is not a happy one," these days, for everything under the light of the sun is expected of him; but let us hope that he will be able to handle the violin-teaching business in such a manner that we will be proud of the violin-playing in the schools and that teachers will find the work so well done that a new foundation will not have to be built to enable the student to reach greater heights.

If violin-playing could be reduced to a science and all the points settled forever, a short course would be all that is necessary to fit one to teach the subject; but teachers of experience still find many things which challenge discussion. There are those who say that artistic violin-playing cannot be acquired if one starts after a certain age; others put a ban on the left-handed person; he is out of the race from the first. The radicals say that it is criminal waste of energy and time unless the aspirant has the divine spark and reveals it early. One teacher of reputation insists that a chin-rest is not necessary on the violin, while another urges us to eliminate the pad or shoulder-rest because it deadens the violin's vibrations. Some say that it is wrong to start children on half and three-quarter size violins, while others believe that the best results can be secured by starting pupils in the third position instead of the first, as is the general custom. One excellent violinist has declared in a published work that the correct position for the left thumb in the three lower positions is behind the first finger rather than forward of it, while another, who holds a responsible position in a large music school, insists that the first finger of the right hand must cross the bow-stick near the knuckle and that the hand must tip over perceptibly in the direction of this finger. So what is the young teacher to do? He goes to hear some great soloist, discovers that the artist does everything wrong and still gets everything right, and he winds up by thinking that with a few lessons he can worry the pupils along some way. Violin-playing is not knowledge alone; it is knowledge plus skill, and the teacher who has not the skill is so poorly equipped that he is of little service.

A point which fails to receive its full share of consideration is the question of a definite pitch. Not only is there great carelessness on the part of teachers about establishing a fixed pitch for their own work, but no attempt is made to hold the pupil's work to a standard pitch while he is at home. Aside from the

injury to the pupil's hearing, much damage is done to the violin. To constantly disturb the tension on the top of an instrument by change of pitch is the surest way for a violin to lose its standard quality of tone. Violin soloists prefer to use old instruments in their public work because after many years of careful handling the violin with age has found its voice, and because it has become adjusted to a certain pitch and will remain in tune throughout lengthy compositions. Speaking of pitch, it may not be out of place to say that the condition of the pianos in some of our schools where students are expected to listen attentively is enough to make serious teachers worry about the ears of our future musicians. Now that our symphony orchestras have established a definite pitch the violin students at least ought to provide themselves with tuning-forks and use them constantly. Unless the home practice can be done with the violin at the same pitch as at the lesson it would be better for the student to do all of his work in the presence of the teacher. Parents who play the piano to help the children during the practice hour should see that their pianos are properly tuned. Not many piano-tuners are sufficiently interested in music as an art to trouble themselves about a correct standard pitch, and even teachers ought not to be too sure that they know all that they need to know about pitch without pausing to look into the matter. Amuse yourself by asking for information on this subject and see what you will get.

As mentioned before, at the very earliest opportunity the young violinist should have private lessons. The instruction should continue for many years, accompanied with solfeggio and the theory of music. A prevalent failing with most of our young people is that as soon as they join an orchestra they immediately discontinue their private lessons. This spells stagnation, for unless the conductor is a gifted drill-master, the orchestra work is likely to tear down technic and breed faults of every description. Even under the very best conditions no orchestra rehearsal was ever known to take the place of a good private lesson. The teacher must have every possible chance to clean up the pupil's technic. Orchestra rehearsals are not unlike candy parties: everyone has a good time but hands get terribly stuck up. Technic must be cleaned constantly; if one has not the ambition to do this for himself he should engage a teacher to help him do it.

Anyone who has had anything to do with amateur orchestras knows the difficulty of finding string players who will follow the fingerings and bowings, the correct notes or anything else indicated on the page. To the fiddler it means too much thinking and he

would much rather spoil the phrasing, the harmony, the entire ensemble than burn up an atom of grey matter. The average non-professional is devoid of an artistic conscience. He follows music for what he can get out of it; money first, and egotistical satisfaction second. He loves himself more than art.

A demand is being created and teachers are expected to meet this demand. The orchestra conductor wants violinists with ears trained to the nth power. Perfect intonation, agreeable quality of tone, a facile left-hand technic and a well-educated bow-arm are the violinist's stock in trade. All other things being equal, the man with a fine violin and a first-class bow will defeat the unfortunate one who has to play on a fiddle and with a crooked stick baldheaded for the want of hair. Conductors are right in insisting that their men must use only high-grade instruments, for it is only by so doing that the tone quality of the ensemble can be kept to a high standard.

The orchestra director classifies the applications about as follows: First, the ones who have technical facility, who can play fast and in tune; second, those who have but little agility, who play slowly but in tune; lastly, those who have a kind of wild, racy, bluff technic with intonation always faulty, and these are in the same class with those who cannot play at all and are nothing but crude bunglers. Speed in violin technic is a very desirable thing, but speed at the sacrifice of purity of pitch and purity of tone is not violin playing. For a player to develop speed and still hold strictly to accurate intonation seven-eighths of his practice must be done with a perfectly quiet left hand. The player who uses the vibrato constantly may be able to melt his friends with some touching selections of the Raff Cavatina type, but speed him up and his playing becomes unbearable. His salvation lies in slow practice long continued until a thorough foundation is established. He must be taught that velocity in violin technic is a thing which cannot be forced; it is the outcome of much slow and serious thinking until familiarity with the fundamentals at last breeds speed as a perfectly natural consequence. If pianists and organists, who have both pitch and the voicing of their tones regulated for them, know the value of slow practice how much more valuable and necessary is it to the violinist, who has to tune every tone, furthermore regulating its quality, duration and power. Our best violinists are not the product of our amateur orchestras, educated under amateur directors, who take unfledged instrumentalists with little or no technic and yank them in a wild scramble through music of

great difficulty. These directors argue that such procedure gives the players practice in sight reading; but they forget that sight reading is the ability to read at sight correctly, and not the clumsy power to crash through a composition with a large percentage of the work wrong. For our civic orchestras skillful sight-players are not so necessary as good conscientious performers who will take the printed parts home and work out the details between rehearsals.

We need more string players; we need violinists, well-trained violinists, not the kind who have taken a few lessons while attending the ward school and have since spent a half-hour each week in practice on popular tunes; but the ones who are devoted to the instrument and who look upon their technic as a thing to be watched and further developed with care. Communities need good amateur violinists to such an extent that in the mind of the civic orchestra director the word orchestra and the word violinist seem synonymous. In the theatres, public schools, Sunday schools, in the lodge orchestras, in fact, all orchestras excepting the professional aggregations, the violins are so much in the minority that the efforts of these organizations sound like small bands. Some communities cannot have serious orchestras at all, because enough string players cannot be found to balance in the slightest degree with the woodwinds and brasses.

However, the thing which kills most amateur orchestras is yet to be mentioned. No sooner has a child become able to carry his violin to the orchestra rehearsal than he is instructed to tell the teacher that he must play first violin or nothing. Some teachers have found it necessary to call all second violins associate first violins in order to get the part performed, and even in some institutions for higher education the conductor must use the utmost tact to get grown up college students to consent to play violas and contrabasses. If these instruments are provided for the players the problem is somewhat solved, but otherwise we are likely to have orchestras composed entirely of first violins and all fighting to sit on the front row. It is not at all unusual to find students who have renounced the violin rather than change to a viola, a 'cello or a bass, where they could reap the fruition of their talents.

Chief, then, among the teacher's duties is the task of instilling into the minds of the students a feeling of altruism. So often the young student is pitted against another in some form of contest that an egotistical spirit of super-musician is so deeply inculcated that later the adult is unfit and unwilling to sink his personality

in an orchestra for the good of the community. The professional orchestra does not suffer much from this, for the bread and butter question keeps the chairs filled; but even there it is doubtful whether the men pray for each other. There can be no successful civic orchestra without coöperation, which to the violinist is only another word for subordination or abnegation. Even the teachers are not free from this criticism. Every civic orchestra director has met the teacher who will not let his pupils play unless they can hold the so-called important positions. There is always evident the player who thinks he can play his part better than the others and therefore refuses to attend rehearsals; expecting, however, to be asked to play the solos at the concert. There are always a number who manage to miss every other rehearsal; they never know what has been decided upon and proceed to spoil the work in the end. We all know the man who drags things down while others are trying to push things up and then arrives at the last rehearsal just in time to go on the concert trip or attend the annual banquet. Even under the strictest disciplinarians so much of this exists in every amateur orchestra that plainly anything like satisfactory ensemble is entirely out of the question. For that reason if a community hopes to get satisfactory results from the instrumentalists the sooner the men are organized into some kind of union and paid for their services, the better. It is either a choice of indifferent music by amateurs who play when they feel like it and who practice at home only when they are in the mood, or to have an organized body of players who must attend rehearsals and who are bound by contract to furnish their best efforts to the community in need of good music. The ten-cent concerts given by professional orchestras in such cities as Chicago and San Francisco seem a long step in the right direction.

The history of satisfactory orchestra music in America, with the exception of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, is a record of instrumentalists organized under union rules. If every community had a Henry Higginson, whose hobby it is to support a symphony orchestra, things might work out along different lines. If union organization does not meet the requirements or ideals of those interested in civic welfare, there is only one other way to keep alive an orchestra of any size or of musical importance: find a man who besides being a genius as an orchestral director can instil into every musician in the community a love of self-sacrifice and a willingness to work in any capacity designated without thought of aggrandizement. Then the work will prosper.

Every member of the orchestra, regardless of his position, must be trained to see that he is needed, but is of importance only so long as he performs his work with reverence for the composer. If like the tympani player he has only to stand and count silent measures he can still truthfully say, "They also serve who only stand and wait."